

## For Your Information

October 29, 2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

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Across the globe, religion and belief continue to matter deeply in the lives of people and their cultures. From worship to prayer, births to funerals, weddings to holy days, almsgiving to thanksgiving, religion is a central source of identity, meaning, and purpose for billions of human beings.

Because religion matters, so does religious freedom. Simply stated, most people strive to practice their beliefs peacefully as they see fit. They seek to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience leads, and live out their convictions openly and peacefully.

Beginning with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, nations around the world have freely assented to international standards which have enshrined this fundamental right.

On Saturday, the United States is celebrating this right by observing International Religious Freedom Day. This celebration marks the day in 1998 that the International Religious Freedom Act was signed. The new law created an international religious freedom office in the U.S. State Department, headed by a new Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which I serve.

An independent, bipartisan, federal government commission, USCIRF monitors religious freedom worldwide and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

Based on our monitoring, we have found that people continue to be denied this universal human right in all too many countries, with violations ranging from onerous rules and regulations to imprisonment, torture, and even murder.

Governments engage in or allow at least three kinds of violations of religious freedom: state hostility toward religion, state sponsorship of extremist religious ideology, and state failure to prevent and punish religious freedom violations. Through state hostility, individuals or groups are persecuted on account of their beliefs. State sponsorship involves governments promoting – including exporting – violent and extremist religious ideas that include calls to violate the religious freedom – and sometimes even the right to life -- of others. State failure refers to governments abandoning their duty to protect those whom others are targeting due to their beliefs, creating a climate of impunity in which religious dissenters are threatened, intimidated,

or even murdered.

Two of the world's worst persecutors exemplify state hostility toward religion: Iran and China.

In Iran, a theocratic government has executed people for "waging war against God," while relentlessly targeting reformers among the Shia Muslim majority, as well as religious minorities, including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and Christians. The Iranian government also stirs up anti-Semitism by promoting Holocaust denial.

In China, the world's most populous nation, a Communist government suppresses disfavored religious groups, including Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Falun Gong, the Protestant house church movement, and Catholics who resist government control of their affairs.

Saudi Arabia's autocratic monarchy practices state sponsorship of radical ideology which targets the religious freedom of others. The Saudi government continues to export, through textbooks and other literature, its own interpretation of Islam which teaches hatred and even violence toward individuals and religious groups.

The actions of the governments of Egypt and Pakistan exhibit state failure to protect the religious freedom of their citizens, often against religiously-related violence, creating a climate of impunity which invites further attacks.

Since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian government has continued to tolerate widespread abuses against religious minorities, including Coptic Orthodox Christians and dissident Sunni Muslims. It also has failed to take adequate steps to bring the perpetrators of violence to justice, respond to virulent anti-Semitism in state-controlled media, or repeal restrictions on Baha'is and Shi'a Muslims.

In Pakistan, the government's longtime failure to protect religious freedom was on brutal display earlier last year with the assassinations of Salmaan Taseer, a Muslim who was governor of Punjab province, and Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian who was Pakistan's Minister for Minority Affairs and a longtime religious freedom advocate. The Pakistani Taliban's despicable assassination attempt on Malala Yousafzai for promoting women's education underscores the danger that others face: in the past 12 months, extremists reportedly have killed as many as 300 Shia Muslims, while Ahmadis and Christians continue to be targeted for violence.

Clearly the landscape for religious freedom around the world is challenging. According to a Pew Research study released in August, 75 percent of the world's population lives in countries that perpetrate or tolerate serious religious freedom abuses. In other words, three out of every four people on earth live in a hostile and repressive environment for the practice of faith.

Given the dire situation for freedom of religion or belief, the United States must continue to play a vital role in defending the defenseless and pressing for the release of the oppressed. Our government should redouble its efforts to seek changes in oppressive systems so that next year, there is no increase in this shocking statistic. The desire for change that pulses through many countries, especially in the Arab world, presents an opportunity for the United States to quietly support such progress, for example, in provisions that would protect religious freedom in the constitutions that several nations are drafting.

Religious freedom is a pivotal human right. For humanitarian purposes alone, it must be defended. But there's another reason the world should care. According to a number of studies, nations that honor and protect this right are more peaceful, stable, and prosperous than those that do not. Nations that trample on this freedom provide fertile ground for poverty and insecurity, and violent, radical movements and activities.

As International Religious Freedom Day approaches, let us pay heed, and redouble our efforts on behalf of this precious human right.

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